

*Mothering slaves: comparative perspectives on motherhood, childlessness, and the care of children in Atlantic slave societies*

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**Introduction: Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the  
Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies**

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1831, Kingston, Jamaica: A newspaper published by free men of colour which campaigns for free coloured civil rights publishes a letter attacking free women of colour for their inadequate motherhood, and specifically their failure to foster respectable sexual morality in their daughters. Such women, the letter writer claims, have themselves been 'schooled to vice from their earliest years', and as a result, they 'bring up their daughters to tread in their own footsteps'.

1860, Vicksburg, Mississippi, USA: A woman freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation is one of tens of thousands expelled from the city by Union forces. She dies at the side of the road leading out of Vicksburg, leaving the infant she had been carrying uncared for.

1886, Taubaté, Southeastern Brazil: Ambrosina, an enslaved woman, is forced to move from her hometown to this new place where she knows no-one, in order to provide care, including breast milk, for the young son of her owner. When the baby Benedito dies of suffocation, Ambrosina is prosecuted for his murder.

These brief fragments about the lives of enslaved and freed women from different societies in the Americas, taken from the articles in this special issue, hint at just a few of the contested relationships experienced by mothers in Atlantic slave societies. As these vignettes suggest, enslaved women's coerced labour frequently included the performance of caring work associated with motherhood for the free children of their owners, while in situations that made it extremely difficult for them to successfully care for their own children. Meanwhile, the strategies they adopted in response to these and similar tensions frequently placed these women under moral scrutiny from those around them, including sometimes those from their own communities.

Historians writing about enslaved women's mothering have to work hard to get beyond the long-accreted layers of mystification that have developed, particularly in Brazil and the United

States, around the figure of the black 'nanny' or 'mammy' who cared for the children of the white household. Slaveholding families both romanticised and celebrated enslaved women's work in the domestic sphere, making it easy for them to consider the tasks performed by nurses, servants, and cooks, among others, not as work but as lovingly offered care, for which monetary or other remuneration--such as the acquisition of manumission after years of work--had no place. This language of affect has obscured the everyday experience of caring for children in a context of coercion. To study enslaved women's motherhood we need to move past these romantic and sometimes nostalgic depictions, while remaining attentive to the real affective element in the work of motherhood. Motherhood was a particular site of conflict in slave societies because it compounded exploitation of women's labour with oppression through the most intimate aspects of their lives, while also providing space for the building of relationships that could enable survival. For all these reasons, it deserves further study.

The articles in this special issue of *Slavery & Abolition*, and the companion issue of *Women's History Review* that will be published in a few months' time, were all presented at conferences of a research network, 'Mothering Slaves', that met in the UK and Brazil in 2015 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> The network brought together scholars concerned with issues related to motherhood, the care of children, and childlessness in slave societies across the Atlantic world and in medieval Europe. In entitling the network and this special issue 'Mothering Slaves' we aim to draw attention to the multiple forms of 'mothering' performed by enslaved women. Many bore children, thus mothering those who would live out their entire lives under slavery. The phrase thus draws attention to the centrality of motherhood to the reproduction of Atlantic slavery: enslaved status was always inherited through the maternal line. In the Latin phrase that was part of the inheritance of Roman law to the Americas, *partus sequitur ventrem* (literally, status follows the womb). The articles in this special issue consider

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the relationship of enslaved women to reproduction, both from the point of view of experiences of pregnancy, birth, and infant care, and from the point of view of the policies of slaveholders and states which aimed to manage population in slave societies through the regulation of women's bodies and reproductive potential. We also consider enslaved women's motherhood as a site of trauma, loss, and grief; in their frequent experience of the death of their children, and in the damage slavery did to their bodies which often prevented them from carrying foetuses to term.

'Mothering slaves' also draws attention to the fact that many enslaved women while mothering their own children also, although with varying frequency in different parts of the Americas, undertook mothering work in caring for their owners' children, providing coerced intimate labour that included the bodily work of breastfeeding. In this second sense, then, the phrase draws attention to 'other mothering' as a form of coerced labour performed by enslaved women.

The 'Mothering Slaves' network involved scholars working in Brazil, the United States, Cuba, Trinidad, France, and the United Kingdom, whose work dealt with slavery across the Americas as well as in medieval Spain; other participants were working on motherhood in other contexts, to extend our comparative lenses. One of the benefits of a transnational network of scholars was the ability of participants to cross some of the linguistic borders in historiography that remain relatively rare in most areas of in the study of Atlantic slavery. The secondary literature on enslaved women in the different slave societies of the Americas is diverse, reflecting a range of historiographical traditions and emphases. Although in most areas there is now a substantial body of work on enslaved women and on the gendered nature of slavery, most historiographies have been slower to integrate these concerns into more general histories of slave society. The attention to motherhood by the scholars whose work is collected here will add another piece of the picture of women's experience of slavery, and collectively the work shows the structural centrality of enslaved women's mothering to the system of Atlantic slavery as a whole. The articles here also work with often fragmentary, limited surviving primary sources in highly innovative ways. They speak to archival

silences and absences, and they read evidence between the lines and against the grain in their efforts to shed light on the all too often hidden lives of subaltern women in the past.

### Mothers, Masters and States

Political authorities and slaveholders across the Atlantic world intervened in women's reproductive lives in order to benefit slaveholders, in some circumstances limiting their opportunities for childbearing while at other times promoting reproduction. Especially in the later years of slave systems, this entailed the devotion of significant resources in an attempt to expand the numbers of children born to enslaved women and to try to ensure their survival. Recognizing this, much discussion of low rates of fertility under slavery has focused on analysis of claims that women actively resisted pronatalist imperatives by refusing to have children. The articles here develop this theme by considering its affective and emotional dimensions.

Sasha Turner and Diana Paton both insist that enslaved women's relationship to pronatalism extended beyond resistance and incorporated also bereavement, trauma, loss, and grief. Turner challenges the notion that enslaved mothers welcomed death because it freed loved ones from bondage. She thus moves beyond narratives of resistance and resilience to expose some of the immense challenges faced by enslaved mothers in the Caribbean. Diana Paton focuses on childlessness among enslaved women, including those unable to bear children or bereaved. She connects the development of pronatalist policies over time with the everyday social dynamics of plantation life for enslaved women, whether they were mothers or not.

Cassia Roth considers similar questions in relation to abortion in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She finds that while discussions of low birth rates among enslaved women frequently accused them of deliberately inducing abortion, only in the post-emancipation period were women prosecuted for such acts and viewed as criminals who deprived the nation of future potential workers. In turn, Jennifer Barclay highlights some cruel aspects of motherhood under slavery, drawing on disability studies. From the point of view of owners – and, later, of the state – the maternity of enslaved, freed

or free women of colour was understood as reproducing the workforce. Sexual, affective and family aspects, including bonds between parents and children, were not valued. Thus, slaveholders regarded women who were unable to have children and mothers with disabilities, particularly congenital disabilities, as superfluous or even actively damaging. At the same time, of course, for diametrically opposite reasons, these same women suffered, in their own communities, the consequences of their inability to bear children. As in many other cultures, raising families was an important task among African and African-American communities.

### Wetnursing and wetnurses

The situation of wetnurses who worked to feed and care for the children of their owners is particularly complex. Breastfeeding by definition involves an intimate bodily process. Enslaved wetnurses often lived in secluded spaces of the slaveholding household, and were trusted with the delicate task of supporting the infant children of slaveholders at the most fragile phase of life. Of all enslaved people, wetnurses probably experienced the most direct forms of control of their mobility and social relations, and slaveholders often prevented them from living with their own families and caring for their own children during this crucial phase of their lives.

Many of the conflicts relating to wet-nursing pre-date Atlantic slavery. As noted above, enslaved women's work within the family tended to blur the boundaries between labour--that of breastfeeding a child--and affective relationships. In her study of the emergence of enslaved wetnurses in fourteenth-century Barcelona, Rebecca Winer shows how, in a period marked profoundly by the Black Death, members of 'well-to-do' households substituted free wetnurses for enslaved ones. This was a consequence of both general impoverishment and the temporary availability of enslaved foreign women whose families had already been separated and who had often lost their own children. Winer's work emphasizes that the work of breastfeeding has always mixed together labour conditions, monetary compensation and extra-professional appreciations, such as beauty, sympathy or 'good' personality. In addition, the specificity of breastfeeding justified



the strict control of the wetnurse's life; besides the master's clear preference for a nurse without her own child, she was also required to abstain from sexual intercourse, which was considered dangerous for the quality of the milk. Moreover, masters' demands grew more intense when enslaved women became available. The manumission agreements initiated in this period reveal heavy demands in terms of control of autonomy, displacement and familiar coexistence of the nurse for long periods. Hence the situation experienced by the enslaved wetnurses in Barcelona in many ways anticipates that experienced in American slave societies.

The use of enslaved wetnurses to feed slaveholders' children took place in all Atlantic slave societies, although to varying degrees. One of the most important issues was the presence or absence of the nurse's own child. This is one of the most controversial and difficult issues for historians because it entangles slaveholders' strategies of maximizing the employment of wetnurses with the problem posed by motherhood in slavery. Wetnurses could rarely live with their own children. Slaveholding families, in principle, preferred that their children could monopolize all the wetnurse's attention--and milk supply--without danger of competition with their children.

Brazilian slaveholders used wetnurses most prominently and frequently. Here, representations of enslaved wetnurses in painting, photography and literature disseminated the idea of paternalistic slavery for many years after emancipation sweetening the memory of exploitation with depictions of the intimacy of these women within patriarchal white families. However, Machado's article focuses on the deep tensions inherent in the presence of an enslaved wetnurse and her son in an urban house in a small town in the slavery-dominated southeastern coffee-growing zone on the eve of abolition. Through analysis of a criminal case in which the wetnurse, Ambrosina, was accused of killing the child in her care, Machado unpicks questions regarding sanitary and hygienic care, the resistance of enslaved mothers to separating from their children or sharing the scarce milk between their offspring and the slaveholders, and the social and labour control relationships lived in the intimacy of the houses. In the background of the drama lived

by the wetnurse was the existence of a market for the purchase, sale and rent of enslaved women. In Brazil, (especially in larger cities such as Rio de Janeiro) this market developed strongly in the decades leading up to the abolition of slavery. This business enterprise specialised in the allocation of domestic workers -- particularly wetnurses -- compounding the exploitative consequences of a larger market where the labour power of enslaved women, poor free women, and those in the process of becoming free, was exchanged.

Wetnursing has not always been recognized as part of the broad spectrum of the use of enslaved people's coerced labour. As Stephanie Jones-Rogers shows, North American historiography on the subject has not always recognized the existence of a specialist buying, selling, and renting market for wetnurses. By analyzing sources including journals, correspondence, and newspaper advertisements, she documents the existence of a market for the purchase, sale and rental of enslaved women, - especially wetnurses - for their own specific characteristics. Due to its connection with the intimate world of the slaveholding household and family, the procurement of wetnurses reproduced the specific characteristics of the world of elite women, marked by discretion, privacy and informality. Thus, the market for wetnurses in antebellum southern cities was well developed, yet almost invisible to strangers. Southern slaveholding women used informal networks to locate enslaved women to act as wetnurses, assessing potential nurses on the basis of a complex set of characteristics including appearance, personality, presence or absence of the wetnurse's own child, body shape, age, and milk supply. Jones-Rogers thus demonstrates how female purchasers led this market for enslaved women. Wetnursing led to some of the most profound and deeply embedded conflicts in the sphere of domestic and female slavery, revealing how the intimate environments of plantation households or urban settings were sites of both exploitation and commodification.

### Sexuality and Sexual Violence

Discussions of the enslavement of women must grapple with questions of the body and sexuality, which were always deeply intertwined with the violence of slavery. In a slave society, enslaved women were subjected to specific forms of violence derived from their female embodiment. They repeatedly suffered all kinds of sexual approaches by masters and other free men who had authority over them - managers, overseers, members of the slaveholders' family who had the right to approach, pressure, blackmail or simply sexually assault enslaved women and girls, even when they were very young, engaged, cohabiting or married (formally or informally, depending on the specific laws of the region in which they were enslaved). This everyday assumed sexual power of free men over enslaved women concentrated in extreme form the sexual coercion encountered by all women in patriarchal societies. Women of African descent, both those unfree but particularly women who were free, sometimes in addition to sexual coercion also faced moralistic criticism from their male peers, black and brown men who sought to undo the stereotype of the black woman and 'dissolute mulatto'.

As Meleisa Ono-George's article explores, one of the most poignant difficulties faced by free black women was the recurrent discourse that they were not sufficiently moral to be mothers. Such women were repeatedly treated as deleterious figures who needed to be controlled and morally educated. Using letters to a Jamaican free coloured newspaper, *The Watchman*, Ono-George shows how men's attempt to counter stereotypes of dissolute and unmaternal women prescribed a very limited set of roles for freed women, extolling not their right to be free of sexual coercion, but rather blaming them for sexual relationships with white men. Women's voices were almost entirely absent from this debate.

Across Atlantic slave societies justifications of sexual violence against enslaved and freed women threw the blame on black women, especially women of mixed descent. Constructed as intrinsically sensual beings, always available and devoid of moral sense, black women were always accused of being responsible for or at least complicit in the violence they suffered. As Saidiya Hartman notes, seduction theory blamed brutalized women for their own rapes, depicting the

perpetrator as a victim of black woman's exaggerated charms.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the psychological and physical injuries faced by raped women, they also often had to deal with the pregnancies that resulted from these encounters, and had to raise the children conceived through rape. Andrea Livesey explores these experiences through a critical reading of testimonies collected by the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana. This method enables her to uncover cases of sexual violence and unrecognized paternity, locating a significant number of sexual assaults that remain silenced in other sources.

### Motherhood and Emancipation

Just as slavery was marked by gender, the process of emancipation was also constructed and experienced through gendered hierarchies, including women's relationships to motherhood and their usually more limited spatial autonomy compared to men. The bourgeois understanding of the home as the natural place of woman and mother had damaging effects on enslaved, becoming free, and freed women before and after emancipation. Working black women were not recognized as belonging to the world of motherhood. White observers constructed their presence in the streets, understood as masculine environments, their constant movement, and their greater autonomy as constituting an absence of femininity and maternal capacity. In many post-emancipation societies, formerly enslaved women came to be judged incapable of marrying legally, maintaining a home, and educating their children. Accusations of low morality, excessive sensuality, sexual availability and absence of maternal feelings fell heavily on these women, producing social representations of the black and the 'depraved mulatta'. Across the slave and post-slave societies of the Americas, the disqualification of black women from the status of mother unfolded in different ways. These social

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<sup>2</sup> Saidya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection. Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially in the chapter 'Seduction and the Ruses of Power', 99-114.

processes were marked not only by the disqualification and invisibility of these women, but also by mothers' resistance.

Focusing on the theme of resistance, Leslie Schwalm shows how the massive historiography of the American Civil War still lacks attention to women and mothers. In focusing on a military history which attends to men and soldiers even when discussing the absorption of escaped slave and the black soldier to the battlefronts, this historiography overlooks the struggles of enslaved women to move amidst the tumults of war, often carrying younger children on their backs. Mothers who reached Union lines were often turned away, or confined to unhealthy and dangerous refugee camps, devoid of any assistance. In the midst of the near silence about black women on the battlefields, the few mentions of their struggle portrayed them as obstacles to military success, despite the hard work of these women as cooks, laundresses, and nurses, for example. Schwalm's article is a significant contribution not only to the recovery of the history of enslaved women in the Civil War but also to the development of Civil War historiography as a whole.

Addressing the difficulties faced by freed women in southeastern Brazilian cities in the decades surrounding abolition, Marília Ariza shows that discussions of women and emancipation need to consider motherhood as an important part of these women's trajectory. Most of the slaves involved in the long battle to gain legal freedom were of reproductive age and therefore were frequently mothers of children who might be enslaved (in the case of those born before the 'Free Womb Law', 1871), freed through a range of mechanisms (such as manumission in the baptismal font) or were 'ingênuos', children born after the 1871 who were under the tutelage of their mothers' masters until the age of 21 and could be transferred according to the will of their legal guardian to third parties. As Ariza shows, freed and becoming free women, compelled to work under highly restrictive employment contracts, found it difficult to provide the necessary care to their children and to maintain legal custody of them. Focusing on this angle of the process of women's acquisition of freedom reveals a social universe marked not only by freedwomen's precarious legal and labour situation, but also by their frequent loss of maternal rights.

Crystal Webster takes up the question of free black women's motherhood in the northern United States to suggest that the difficulties of black working mothers in the North in many ways paralleled those of enslaved mothers in the South. Their poverty, lack of legal protections, leading to the separation of free working black women from their children, the difficulties of employment, the extensive legal oversight from employers and the state, all enabled constant intrusions of third parties into the relationship between black mothers and their children. However, Webster shows how these women employed strategies to control their situation as mothers inspired by the experience of enslaved women. Like Ariza, Webster suggests that the condition of the lives of poor, free, black working mothers frequently led to their being seen as incapable of appropriate motherhood, thus justifying the separation of mothers and children on the grounds that this would be beneficial for those children. Both articles show how African American mothers developed both discursive and practical resources to deal with their situation.

The myriad experiences of women of colour – enslaved, freed, and freeborn – before and after emancipation provide a useful site from which to deepen our understanding of slavery in the Americas. Attending to the role of enslaved mothers in the development of slave and post-slave societies in a variety of different contexts enables us to better comprehend the still too-often neglected perspectives of enslaved women themselves. Owners' and states' policies with respect to gender, reproduction and maternity were arenas of profound conflict between slaveholding and post-slaveholding interests and the social and affective demands of women, men and children who experienced enslavement. Women's role in both working and confronting the pronatalist impulses of slaveholders and landowners meant that they not only experienced a double slavery but also generated a double resistance. As mothers, they sought to preserve the family links that allowed them to raise their children and sustain their cultures in slavery and into the era of emancipation.